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DEPT FOR EUR/AGS, INR/EU, AND EUR/PPD FOR YVETTE SAINT-ANDRE

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SUBJECT: AUSTRIAN MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS: September 10, 2007

Austrians Not Happy With Government

¶1. A recent survey by polling institute Gallup has revealed that almost 50 percent of Austrians disapprove of the SPOe-OeVP coalition government's work so far. The government will have to do far better from now on, if it wants to convince the people it is doing a good job, one daily argues, and points out that as many as 47 percent of interviewees are calling for improvements to the coalition's performance in office. Only 35 percent say they are happy with the SPOe-OeVP government. According to mass-circulation tabloid Oesterreich, the Gallup survey also shows that when it comes to voters' support, the People's Party, at 36 percent, is ranked first; followed closely by the Social Democrats with 35 percent of the votes. Among the opposition parties, the FPÖ (14 percent) has overtaken the Greens for the first time in months, but experts suggest the current increase in support for the Freedom Party is not going to last.

Squabble Over Kosovo Initiative

¶2. Regarding the question of the Serbian province Kosovo's future status, Washington is breathing down the EU's neck, one Austrian daily says, and quotes Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik as stressing the US' stance was "not helpful." The US' decision to push ahead on Kosovo was "perfectly timed," centrist daily Die Presse reports: Just when the EU foreign ministers were struggling over a common EU position on Kosovo, Washington announced it would "recognize the independence of Kosovo," should Pristina decide in favor of a unilateral declaration of the province's independent status. According to Kurt Volker, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State in the State Department's Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, this was the "only way out for the Balkans." Austria's Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik was "not amused," the Presse writes, and quotes her as saying a unilateral commitment was "not helpful" at this point. However, the daily notes, although the EU foreign ministers were "all but falling over each other" in their appeals for and statements on a common EU position on Kosovo, they are apparently still "completely in the dark" as to that joint stance.

Petraeus to Present Iraq Report

¶3. The top US commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, is expected to tell Congress today that there should be no substantial cuts in US troop levels in Iraq. Gen. Petraeus and leading political advisors to President Bush are scheduled to report to four Congressional committees later today. Meanwhile, according to a recent survey done

in Iraq, most Iraqis interviewed said the surge of US forces in and around Baghdad had made conditions much worse. However, just over 50 percent also say the troops should stay until security has improved.

Liberal daily Der Standard says that the United States' top commander in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus, and US Ambassador to Iraq Ryan Crocker, have both warned the Bush administration against altering its strategy on Iraq. Major changes would only jeopardize progress with regard to security and the country's political development, they emphasize in their report to Congress. Meanwhile, Gen. Petraeus in a letter to US troops is also accusing the Iraqi government of having failed to meet US expectations in connection with this year's troops surge. However, neither he nor Ambassador Crocker believes there is an alternative to Premier Nuri al-Maliki at this time, the Standard quotes. The daily also notes that the US troops surge has undoubtedly resulted in an improvement of the security situation in Baghdad, where the number of attacks has gone down in recent times. It appears, however, that the insurgents have merely relocated to the neighboring province of Dijala, where provincial governor Abdulla Al-Jubori has noted an "unprecedented concentration of terrorists." His province had become a stronghold for al Qaeda and associated organizations.

Former Pakistani PM Returns Home

14. The former Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, has returned home after seven years in exile. His plane was surrounded by security forces as he landed at Islamabad airport, and he was only allowed to disembark and enter the airport building after an hour of negotiations. Sharif has said he will lead a campaign against President Pervez Musharraf, who ousted him from power in 1999. Austrian media suggest that the former Premier's return will likely lead to an "all-out fight over power" between Sharif and Musharraf. Liberal daily Der Standard reports there is "high alert" and "breathless anticipation" ahead of the return to Pakistan of the country's former Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif. Despite barely concealed threats, Sharif has stuck to his plan to return to his country after seven years of exile in London, the daily continues. Indeed, the Standard explained, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf should fear the popular former Premier more than anyone else. The President has suffered a massive loss of support in the past months, and is literally fighting for his political survival, according to the Standard. Similarly, centrist daily Die Presse reports on a "showdown" between Musharraf and Sharif. After all, the former Premier has openly declared he wants to challenge Musharraf with his early return and restore the rule of law in Pakistan.

Tehran Is Playing for Time

15. ... US Ambassador to the United Nations in Vienna Gregory Schulte told an Austrian daily, ahead of a new round of IAEA negotiations with Iran over its controversial nuclear program. Recent successes in the UN nuclear watchdog's talks with Tehran have given rise to new hope - and new doubts, the daily adds.

With a new round of IAEA negotiations regarding the timetable for Tehran's full disclosure of its nuclear program beginning in Vienna today, mass-circulation daily Kurier quotes US Ambassador to UNVIE Gregory Schulte as warning that despite assurances to the contrary, Tehran may be doing no more than "play for time," given the fact that the controversy over Iran's nuclear ambitions is now well into its fourth year. "We have seen this strategy before," Ambassador Schulte argues, and adds that "it is not enough to simply tidy up the past. We have to insist on a stop to uranium enrichment (on the part of Tehran). That is the only way for Iran to win back the international community's trust." In contrast, IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei is pushing for a more optimistic approach, and has suggested giving Tehran until the end of the year to determine whether it keeps its promises or not.

McCaw